

Opinion: African Lions Should Not Be Listed as Endangered

Responsible hunters bring in money for conservation efforts.



A lioness ignores her prey at sunset on the plains of Kenya. Can lion hunting support conservation?

Photograph by Darran Rees/Corbis

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a petition from several animal rights groups to place the African lion on the list of endangered species. By law, species are to be placed on that list only when the Fish and Wildlife Service determines that they are currently "in danger of extinction." In an attempt to garner support for the petition, a proponent claimed recently that the lion is "in danger of disappearing in our lifetimes."

(Related: ["Opinion: Why Are We Still Hunting Lions?"](#))

Is the condition of the lion really that dire? Fortunately, the most recent scientific data say no. A [comprehensive study](#) published last December concluded that there are between 32,000 and 35,000 lions living in the wild in Africa. The lion population is spread across 27 countries, with nine countries having populations of at least 1,000 lions. (See ["The Serengeti Lion."](#))

Of greatest significance is the fact that 24,000 of the lions, which is at least 68 percent of the total population, live in what the study terms "strongholds." Strongholds are areas that meet "the necessary requirements for [the] long-term viability" of their lion populations.

To qualify as a stronghold, an area must meet these three criteria:

- 1) a population of at least 500 lions;
- 2) be legally protected as lion habitat, or be an area where hunting is managed; and
- 3) contain a population of lions whose numbers are either stable or increasing.

There are ten such areas in Africa. According to the study, the lion populations living in these areas are "large, stable, and well protected," and the populations are therefore "likely to persist into the foreseeable future."

Even the petition itself acknowledges that "one-third of all the lions on the continent could be considered secure under present conservation measures."

Lions: Here to Stay

This is simply not the portrait of a species that is "in danger of disappearing in our lifetimes." The best scientific data do not support the notion that the lion is currently in danger of extinction.

Indeed, at a recent lion workshop convened by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the three lion experts invited to address the assembly—Paula White, director of the [Zambia Lion Project](#); Jason Riggio, principal author of the study cited above; and [Craig Packer](#) of the University of Minnesota—were unanimous in their opinion that the lion is not currently in danger of extinction.

If the Fish and Wildlife Service were to take regulatory action and put the African lion on the Endangered Species list, it would be in spite of the overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. Such an overreaching decision would deprive the countries that grapple with lion management the resources they need the most. And the most essential resource is money.

According to Dennis Ikanda, director of the Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute's [Kingupira Research Centre](#), his country generated \$75 million in lion hunting alone from 2008 to 2011.

Tanzania also has 15 photo-safari areas, which have been lauded as a non-consumptive alternative to traditional hunting tourism. Unfortunately, only 4 of the 15 photo-safari areas are financially viable. The remaining 11 are subsidized by hunter-generated funds. So without the financial resources provided by hunters to protect habitat and stop poachers, there would be no infrastructure for wildlife management.

Fighting Poachers

The Safari Club International Foundation recognizes that saying that the lion is not currently in danger of extinction is not the same as saying that the lion does not face challenges. The many people and governments, both in Africa and worldwide, who care about the lion must continue to work diligently to address those challenges.

We welcome the recent announcement by U.S. President Barack Obama that he will establish a [Presidential Task Force on Wildlife Trafficking](#) to develop a strategy for supporting global anti-poaching efforts. Poaching of lions, by definition illegal, is a problem for the sustainability of the population. With this announcement, the President has taken a step to elevate the response to the threat that illegal poaching poses for all wildlife.

Recent polling confirms that preventing illegal wildlife trade is the top priority among Americans when asked to rate the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's missions.

President Obama's initiative recognizes that it is illegal poachers, not regulated hunters, who pose a threat to wildlife. As with the regulated hunters in the United States, the regulated hunters in Africa make a vital contribution to conservation efforts, primarily through the revenues their hunting expeditions generate for local communities and wildlife resource agencies.

The financial role international hunters play has a direct correlation to local communities tolerating wildlife nearby. According to a [2004 study in Tanzania](#), hunting tourism employed approximately 3,700 people annually. In turn, those workers supported 88,240 families. Hunters are part of the solution.

My group also welcomes President Obama's pledge to provide \$10 million in aid to African countries to assist them in their efforts to address the problem of illegal poaching. President Obama wisely recognizes that the fight to preserve the many magnificent wildlife species in Africa, not just from illegal poaching, but from a variety of challenges, must be led and ultimately won by the people on the ground in Africa—the people who live in and around the prime wildlife habitats and the people who lead African governments.

The people and governments of lion-range states continue to make progress in their efforts to develop and implement conservation strategies for the African lion. Benin, Botswana, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are all conducting lion monitoring and research projects.

And most of these countries have adopted regional and national lion management plans; unfortunately, not all of these countries have the financial resources to fully implement them.

Convening a Forum and Raising Money

For the last 12 years, my group has sponsored the annual [African Wildlife Consultative Forum](#) (AWCF). The forum brings together representatives of most of the sub-Saharan governments for a week-long discussion on wildlife management and shared conservation success stories. The coalition provides these countries the opportunity to learn from each other's successes and problems, and to work together to develop strategies for wisely managing their wildlife resources.

Forum participants include wildlife professionals, regulatory officials, and representatives of the hunting industry. Our group is proud to be the prime catalyst and support base for this invaluable discussion forum, which works to promote the development and implementation of policies that will ensure the survival of Africa's remarkable wildlife species for generations to come.

But to implement these strategies, these nations are in dire need of the resources that only managed hunting brings into their economies. In that light, the greatest threat to the lion's future is not from hunting, but from the potential Endangered Species Act listing.

